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NATIONAL LANGUAGE & MINORITY LANGUAGE RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

This brief paper highlights the perspectives of those proposing and opposing the idea of Minority Language Right (MLR). Then, the paper relates this discussion to the context of bi/multilingualism in Indonesia by referring to cases of bi/multilingualism in different contexts. In particular, it is also discussed whether MLR is relevant to Indonesian, a national language of Indonesia, seen through historical, political, social, and economic perspectives of bi/multilingualism in Indonesia. In the end, the author's stance of MLR is asserted.

Keywords: Bilingualism; Multilingualism; Minority Language Rights; National Language

INTRODUCTION

In bi/multilingual communities, it would be seemingly possible to see a majority language contributes to the death of one or more minority languages. This is just makes sense because speakers of minority language(s) would try to speak and use a majority language if they want to excel (socially, economically, or politically) in a community where a majority language is spoken.

The notion of whether a minority language should be maintained or whether speakers of a minority language have the right to maintain and use their language on daily basis has been hotly debated by sociolinguists. Despite its growing presence

in the field of sociolinguistics, minority language rights development faces some intellectual critiques. Experts like May (2003, 2004, 2005, 2012), Canagarajah (2005), Grin (2005), and Skutnab-Kangas (1994, 2000, 2002, 2004) have discussed the notion of Minority Language Right (MLR) from two conflicting views, views of the proponents and opponents of MLR.

THE DILEMMA

May (2005, 2012) particularly lays out three main intellectual critiques aimed at the advocates of language rights. The first critique is the "*problem of historical inevitability*" which would mean it is a fact that a language will change and modernize from time to time in that it seems impossible to resist from linguistic modernization. The second critique is about the "*problem of essentialism*" that refers to the questionable relationship between language and ethnic identity. The second critique suggests that language does not necessarily mean ethnic identity. According to May (2005), the critique maintains that the language does not define but it touches on "a surface feature of ethnic identity, adapting another language would only affect the language use aspect of our ethnic identity, not the identity itself" (p. 328). Then the last critique addresses the "*problem of mobility and use*." This critique attracts our attention to the fact that using majority language may actually enhance someone's mobility, mobility in term of social capitals and others. In other words, insisting on using and speaking a minority language will limit its speaker's mobility as, for example, the language is only used in very limited circumstances. Nonetheless, May (2005) suggests that Minority Language Movement has, indeed, highlighted that the "processes of linguistic change are often the result of wider social and political processes" (p. 339). Therefore, we might be able to question and challenge the "fixed" correlation between a majority language and its speaker's mobility, progress or development.

Questioning whether human rights approach to language planning and policy enhances equality to diverse students, Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) points out his viewpoints by claiming that existing indigenous and minority education in the world is relevant to how the United Nations defines the term *linguistic genocide*, in which the dominant languages kill other minority languages. He gives example of minority

children educated in a formal school. These children will get educated through dominant or official language, as the medium of instruction. When they are adult, it is unlikely that they will speak the non-dominant language to their children; after one or two generation, the indigenous language seems to gradually disappear.

In a broader sense, Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) then refers to what degree governments in the world respect for Human Rights; she analyzes this from how each government ratifies so called Human Rights documents. In relation to this, the author reviews the implementations of governments' claims on the promoting education that is friendly to minority people. She found that most of the governments did not actually do what they say they would do. To support this assertion, Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) refers to Sweden as an example. Sweden has signed the *European Charter* (which is relevant to "mother tongue medium education") for languages: "Sami, Finnish, and Meankieli as minority languages in Sweden. Sweden, however, does not "grant any educational rights whatsoever to speakers of Romani or Yiddish, whereas the other three languages all have the same rights." (p. 192). Although it sounds sad, Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) concludes that Human rights approach to language policy and planning does not seem to be effective in advocating equal education to minority students.

In a rather balanced voice, Canagarajah (2005) particularly responds to arguments voiced out by either proponents or opponents of Minority Language Rights (MLR) by analyzing the debates in context of language planning and policy in Sri Lanka; the promotion of Tamil by military government in North and East of Sri Lanka. To do this, the author revisits the data he collected in Jaffna society to see how Tamil-Only policy was welcomed in people's daily life.

It then seems inconsistent, according to Canagarajah, to see English is ineluctably used in everyday interactions in spite of 'nationalistic policy" of the political leadership. While the government is trying to promote a full use of Tamil, it also still uses English. There are socio-political issues underlying this phenomenon. "While Tamil is useful for the job and resources available in the local context, English functions as the economic and symbolic capital for translocal opportunities" (p.432). In this instance, Canagarajah (2005) asserts that this inconsistency does not

mean that the policy is a complete failure as Tamil has been increasingly utilized for official objectives in the Tamil homeland; Tamil people are not strangers in their own land anymore.

In general, this article argues that the dichotomies made by either the proponents or opponents of MLR cannot always answer the complex nature of language planning and policy. For the case of Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (2005) believes that "societal multilingualism" is aimed by the people. "They view multilingualism as a resource" (p. 441); in other words, they want both English and local languages exist since they can benefit from it at different situations or they will then be able to "shuttle" between the discourses of the two languages (see Canagarajah, 2006a). He then invites policy makers to view policy as ideological and has to be in accordance with political, historical, social contexts of specific communities.

Like May (2005), Grin (2005) scrutinizes the notion of 'linguistic human rights' (LHR) or 'linguistic diversity' and critiques it receives. In general, Grin believes that even though the notion of LHR is one of the most crucial efforts to protect and maintain minority languages, it also shows some weaknesses. According to Grin, proponents of LHR almost exclusively support their arguments with "moral considerations" which cannot pass the three objections; *the feasibility of LHR movement*, *costs it might incur*, and *burden sharing*.

It is not always feasible to protect and promote a minority language since its rights-based arguments will only impress those who share the same view (e.g. public figures or political leaders). In this regard, Grin points out that rights-based argument is also seen "philosophically weak, since it would imply a belief in the *a priori* superiority of the arguments of anyone who happens to agree with us" (pp. 451-452). LHR sometimes seems infeasible when communities whose languages are at risk of disappearing doubt or object to the efforts of preserving their languages.

LHR-related policies can also incur additional cost. Grin explains that "linguistic diversity carries both cost and benefits, and that whereas benefits increase at decreasing rate, costs increase at increasing rate, yielding the apparently innocuous, but politically far-reaching implication" (p. 453). Supporting this

assertion, Grin refers to the case of Guatemalan bilingual education. The policy for moving from monolingual to bilingual education has required additional expenses up to four to five percent of average per-capita expenditure.

Another weakness of LHR is "burden sharing". According to Grin, even if the abovementioned objections can be tackled by the proponents of LHR, LHR still raises questions regarding "the cost of the policy measures"; whether it gives benefits to the whole community. This is relevant to the fact that "some members of the society are likely to lose while others win from the policy" (p. 455).

Even though Grin has shown the causes of insufficient arguments for advocating linguistic human rights, he does acknowledge LHR usefulness as it has already moved toward policy analysis; moving from "negative" to "positive" rights. The United Nations' *Declaration of the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities* (1992) is taken as an example.

THE CASE OF INDONESIA: WHAT'S NEXT?

I think Canagarajah's (2005) article "Dilemmas in planning English/vernacular relations in post-colonial communities" gives us a new way of looking at majority/minority language debates and "theoretical dilemmas" of Minority Language Rights movements. Particularities of a community very much determine the nature of government language planning and policy. In particular, the article assesses the language policies and practices in Jaffna, a northern part of Sri Lanka which is the center for culture, religion, and politics for Tamil people.

Canagarajah (2005) has pointed out that arguments for promoting and preserving minority language are "futile" as they are confronted by the needs of individuals for economic and social mobility, as discussed by Grin (2005). These debates have then created a dichotomization. This situation may "lead to overstating the positions, simplifying reality, and destroying the utility important LPP (language planning and policy) constructs in favor of one ideological position or the other" (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 420). He believes that these conflicting issues need to be viewed within specific communities that may have complexities in terms of "historical and geopolitical contexts." Here, I believe linguistic repertoires in Indonesia indicate

such complexities considering Indonesia's unique historical and geopolitical contexts. In this sense, Musgrave (2011) asserts that the use of national language in Indonesia "has not led to a reduction the richness of linguistic repertoires of individual speaker" (p. 88).

Long before Indonesia gained its independence, youths from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds met on October 28, 1928 and they declared *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Oath) pledging to have one homeland, one nation, and one unifying language (Indonesian). This oath was then followed series of other pro-independence movements until Indonesia gained its independence in 1945. After being independent, Indonesian which was derived Malay was then declared as the national language to unite the country.

I personally agree with Canagarajah's assertion that we will likely perpetuate the dichotomy (proponents and opponents of MLR) if we blatantly propose that one position is better than the other, ignoring the historical, social and political complexities of a certain communities. For instance, I used to think that the policy of using a single language as our national language had caused other local languages to disappear. However, I then understood that it is a very crucial need for Indonesian people to have a language that can be used and understood by people whose linguistic backgrounds are different.

Although there is no a single agreed upon consensus, many asserts that some 500-700 local languages exist in Indonesia, Steinhauer,1994, Musgrave, 2014, and Budiyanto, 2012. In fact, these local languages have contributed to the development of vocabulary of Indonesian language (Budiyanto, 2012) and this means that the death of local languages throughout Indonesian archipelago might not necessarily be caused by the national language. Even if some people stop using their local language, it does not automatically mean the policy forces them to do so. Instead, I would think this indication is personally-dependent; they personally choose to only adopt the national language. Therefore, the government has to be proactive to raise people's awareness so that they will value their indigenous languages and eventually help them be preserved.

For the case of in Sri Lanka, Canagajarah explains that Tamil-Only policy in Jaffna was particularly enacted by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) after it established its *de facto* state in 1990. This military regime, says Canagarajah, use its military and political might to create a "state of homogenous Tamil community" after a series of multilingual policies (English as ex-colonizer's language and Sinhala as the majority language) had failed. Although there was endeavor of promoting the Tamil-Only policy, the implementation somehow shows inconsistency. The regime officials still used English in formal communications and Tamil was very much used at informal settings though it was codified as the official language. Ironically, the regime officials themselves use English in their formal interactions (e.g. when talking about the technology) despite the regime's policy to use the local language in such a formal situation. I believe this is also happening in Indonesia where the call for purification of the national language is voiced out; some officials still like to use "unpurified" version of the national language in their formal communications. For example, a member of the cabinet code-switches from Indonesian to his or her local versions of the national language (oftentimes mixing with phrases or words taken from his or her local language) when talking to the media about his or her ministerial works.

I think it is interesting to learn that both monolinguals and multilinguals in Jaffna enjoy different but promising economic, social, and political power. "The bilinguals dominating the professions enjoy social status and economic … the monolinguals dominating the local administration and politico-military enjoy significant power" (Canagajarah, 2005, p. 432). He further claims that it is also necessary for bilinguals in Jaffna to be fluent in Tamil to show their "ethnic solidarity" and for monolinguals to be capable of at least code-switching in English to show others that they are "educated" monolinguals.

If I compare to Indonesia, this case, however, seems to be different. If people insist on being monolingual or speak only their local language, they will not get the same opportunities as the multilinguals enjoy (as most Indonesians speak more than two languages). Being literate in Indonesian language is indispensable for our mobility and access to higher statuses. Even though Indonesian language is not a

mother tongue for almost 80 % of Indonesian population, the people are all able to speak it since they learn it from their formal education and from their daily exposure to the language. I take the position that multilinguals in Indonesia maintain their indigenous languages (at least use it in particular circumstances) not only to show their "ethnic solidarity" but also to display their ethnic identity. I personally use my two local languages as part of my ethnic identity; when I speak a local language, I will then consider myself as belonging the ethnic group that use the language. Further, I will use the national language when I speak to people from different ethnic groups whose languages I do not speak to indicate my nationalism as a citizen of Indonesia.

Furthermore, Indonesia is particularly unique in its language planning and policies. The Indonesian national language, *Bahasa Indonesia,* was not taken from any local ethnic group but it was derived from varieties of Malay language. For that reason, the adoption of *Bahasa Indonesia* as the national language would not lead any ethnic group to claim dominance over the others. Moreover, the national language use is strongly associated with the sense of nationalism among Indonesians (Renandya, 2004, Idris, 2014). I personally think these characteristics have helped Indonesian language policy successful. Like Canagarajah, I also believe that examining a language policy through any possible particular contexts would help us better understand the nature language policy and planning, and language minority rights.

To sum up, I would encourage parents to do everything they can to preserve their local languages so that these languages will continue to survive for many generations to come. One way to do this is by using the local languages to communicate at home or teaching the local languages as local contents within formal schools that use majority languages as media of instruction. Even though *Bahasa Indonesia,* as the national language, might not necessarily kill local languages, providing a few or no opportunities to use the local language for the children will surely result in the death of the local languages. This is important because, when a language dies, "a considerable amount of the culture, identity, and knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation through and

within that language" (Baker, 2012, p. 46) will also die. Too many valuable things will disappear if a language if left to die. This is just sad!

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